

States must take lead in funding stem-cell research

This editorial appeared in The Philadelphia Inquirer.

President Bush is not listening, so states should go their own ways and not listen to him.

On Wednesday, Bush vetoed the second bill within a year to ease restrictions on federal funding for human embryonic stem-cell research that destroys the embryo.

Congress won't override. The Senate might have enough votes, but the House doesn't. Still, Senate leaders should drum up a resounding response to remind Bush that his stance is deaf to public sentiment, scientific consensus and the suffering of people with incurable neurologic diseases and disorders.

And then? The states should thumb their noses at a policy designed to serve, not all the people, but only a favored coterie.

New Jerseyans should vote in November to allow their state to borrow \$450 million for embryonic stem-cell research. The day after Bush's veto, the state legislature voted for the idea, and Gov. John Corzine will almost certainly go along, continuing a trail blazed in 2005, when the state became the first to fund such research directly.

California has approved \$3 billion; Connecticut \$100 million. Maryland, Illinois and other states are jostling to get in line. It's a flight from a bad policy.

Meanwhile, Bush not only vetoed the bill but also issued an executive order to encourage what he calls "alternative" research.

What he means is research that doesn't destroy human embryos. Yes, explore all means to preserve embryos — what everyone wants is the day scientists don't have to use them any more for these purposes. But the research is preliminary; it's in mice (and getting from there to hu-

mans is hard). And almost all scientists doing it say it's no replacement. Bush isn't listening to them, either.

By means of bald assertion, the White House seeks to enshrine in law what is essentially a religious belief: that all stages of human life are sacred — hands off.

As President Abraham Lincoln pointed out, it's fine to do that in this country if you can sell all the people on it, but Bush can't, hasn't tried — he knows he would fail — and is instead establishing by fiat a policy favored mainly by people who share this religious view.

The truth is that most people are willing to consider the use of some forms of human life as a means to medical benefits. Individuals may not want to admit that, but you can find the evidence in polls, in the passage of more and more state laws and in the billions now flowing to research from state and private sources. People may harbor (as they should) mixed feelings, but that's where they come down.

To be sure, there is a justifiable, honorable, godly fear that to let science toy with the mystery of life is to cross a terrifying line. Humanity must be on guard. But neither the means nor the knowledge now exists to pitch us into a Brave New World.

Ours is the world of in vitro fertilization; the genome and the mind are in play. Human beings are accepting tough, agonizing but justifiable choices: Embryo? Fetus? Fully fledged living person losing memory, personhood and connection bit by bit? While such distinctions may outrage tradition, they may better reflect reality.

Maybe that's sad — or maybe something has changed. If federal policy insists on remaining backward, then the states must go forward on their own.

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